

Review

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Werner Senn, *Conrad's Narrative Voice: Stylistic Aspects of His Fiction*.

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Rodopi, a key publisher for Conradians, is now Brill Rodopi, but the invaluable “Conrad Studies” series of publications continues its impressive progress under the new imprint. The tenth volume in the series is a reprint of Werner Senn’s study, first published by Francke Verlag, Bern, in 1980. This republication is very welcome: published outside the Anglophone world, Senn’s study perhaps received less than its due on its first appearance. Much has happened in Conrad studies in the 36 years since this initial publication, but *Conrad's Narrative Voice* is a major work of criticism and scholarship that remains essential reading for the student of Conrad’s fiction. Those who missed it on its initial publication should make sure that they take advantage of its reissue.

Senn wrote his study before computers became part of the scholar’s – and the ordinary citizen’s – daily life. At the start of the book he notes that only two of the computerized concordances to Conrad’s works, those for “Heart of Darkness” and *Lord Jim*, were available to him when he wrote the book. Today, almost all of Conrad’s works are available online in electronic form, and a standard word processor can produce a concordance from a downloaded text in a matter of minutes. Sometime disadvantages have their positive aspects, however. If today it is possible to produce some sort of stylistic analysis of a Conrad novel on the basis of such a home-generated concordance without ever having read the text as a work of fiction, Senn’s isolation of stylistic features was necessarily the product of a painstaking, but sympathetic and intelligent reading of the works in question. He writes: “As its title indicates, [the book’s] aim is to consider certain aspects of Joseph Conrad’s literary language and style that have hitherto been rather neglected but which, in my view, are important for an assessment of his achievement. It proposes to consider these aspects in terms of their function in the narrative, in the first place, and only secondly as elements of style” (1). This prioritising of – to oversimplify – the literary critical over the linguistic, characterizes Senn’s procedure throughout the book.

The book’s chapter headings provide a clear indication of the topics covered. In addition to an Introduction and a summarizing Conclusion (subtitled “Narrative Voice” these are: “Vocabulary and Language of Fact”; “Negation, Privation, Absence”; “Sight and Insight”; “Physiognomy: Eyes, Faces, Looks”; “Character Reference”; “Conjecture, Estrangement, and Distancing”; and “Free Indirect Style.” Some of these topics, such as Conrad’s use of Free Indirect

Discourse and his obsessive concern with the visual and with eyes and faces, have received substantial attention since Senn's study was first published. Others have not.

In the chapter entitled "Vocabulary and Language of Fact" Senn has interesting things to say about Conrad's changing use of adjectives as his style develops. He notes, for example, that:

Enumerations, series of all kinds and lengths abound in Conrad's works; they may consist of words, phrases, clauses, or a mixture of those, and they may extend from two to eight or more items. His favourite types are the two- and three-part series. Indeed the triple parallelism has been called Conrad's "own special signature in the English novelistic prose of his time," but it should be noted that he uses it far more often in his earlier works than in his later ones. (25)

Even so, Senn demonstrates that quantitatively, "Conrad's earlier prose style is not more 'adjectival' than that of other writers of the period," but that the impression that it is can be attributed to his preference in the early works for "'weighty', polysyllabic adjectives" such as inconceivable, inscrutable, and unspeakable (15).

The chapter following extends this concern with some extremely interesting information about what Senn terms "negative adjectives." He notes that "this writer usually praised for his extraordinary visual imagination often seems to go out of his way to describe an object by what it is not, evoking a visual or generally sensory aspect only to deny its presence in the object or event under view. Thus we read of 'sombre, uncrested waves' [*Lord Jim*], of the 'unglittering level of the waters' [*The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*], of 'unsmiling' faces and glances [*The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and 'Amy Foster']" (30). In particular, Senn draws attention to Conrad's use of "deverbal adjectives," such as "ungleaming," "unglowing," "unringing," and "unpictureseque." Alone or in sequences these contribute to some of Conrad's most memorable descriptions: for example the "unfeminine" timbre of Natalia Haldin's voice, or the Russian harlequin in "Heart of Darkness" who is "ruled by the 'uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure'" (31). In *Lord Jim*, Senn points out, these deverbal adjectives are "virtually confined to the narrator and hardly ever used by any of the (other) characters" (34). This habit of defining things by what they are not manages to suggest something that, although denied, remains as a worrying possibility. As Senn puts it: "intimations of a hidden, possibly threatening or at least adverse purpose under the surface of perceived facts at once evoke the basic insecurity and uncertainty of human existence and provoke speculation and the desire to discover the intention, to 'read' the face of facts" (36).

In the fourth chapter, "Sight and Insight," Senn points out that it is typical of Conrad's fiction that we encounter "not 'he said' but 'I heard him say'" (71). "The process here is one of saying *I saw X doing y* rather than *X did y*: it is basically one of transforming active subjects into observed objects" (66).

The sixth chapter, “Character Reference: Naming and Point of View,” contains fascinating discussion of Conrad’s use of *autonomasia*, particularly when used repetitively through anaphoric reference. *Autonomasia* is a form of metonymy in which an epithet or phrase takes the place of a proper name, and Conrad is very fond of it. Thus in *Under Western Eyes* the teacher of languages does not just refer to Sophia Antonovna and Peter Ivanovitch as “the woman revolutionist” and “the great feminist” on a single occasion, but repetitively. So far as the second of these examples is concerned, Senn observes that here “we can hardly fail to perceive an ironic overtone that at least tells us something about the narrator’s attitude if it does not in fact colour our own judgement of the character in question” (146). Senn argues that *autonomasia* is prominent in *Nostramo* and *The Secret Agent*, but is virtually absent from the first-person narratives (167), although this claim seems in tension with the examples he provides from *Under Western Eyes*, which surely must be classified as a first-person narrative. Of interest is the observation that while, in “The Secret Sharer,” the fugitive gives his name as Leggatt before even climbing on board, the narrator never uses this name in his account once Leggatt is on board the ship (147).

The seventh chapter, “Conjecture, Estrangement, and Distancing,” includes extensive discussion of Conrad’s use of “the *as-if*-locution, also called simile or, after its grammatical function, modification; and the modalizing verb ‘seem’ (and its synonym ‘appear’), also called modalization” (169). This is one of the richest extended accounts in the book. Senn relates this use to Conrad’s manipulation of involvement and distance on the part of both narrators and readers, and he argues that the “continuous alternation between involvement and distance keeps the reader (although he may not be aware of it all the time) focused not so much on the facts and the events as on their effects on the characters” (174). So far as Conrad’s use of these locutions is concerned, the following comment usefully exhibits Senn’s tentative, non-dogmatic form of argument, one in which context – at the local level and at the level of the work as a whole – is never lost sight of.

The two features occurring separately but in the same contexts can therefore be said to supplement and reinforce one another in a cumulative effect. To argue from this that Conrad’s entire work is concerned with a dichotomy between appearance and reality would be to oversimplify one of its fundamental issues. Yet there is undoubtedly a relationship between stylistic features and themes, and the modalization by “seem” in such a late work as *The Shadow-Line*, where that theme is an important one, reaches a frequency nearly equal to that of earlier works like “Heart of Darkness” or *Lord Jim*. (196)

This chapter also contains thought-provoking arguments about the way in which the choice of particular words may have an effect not unlike that achieved by the use of Free Indirect Discourse – that of suggesting the perspective of a character within the discourse of a narrator. Thus in “Typhoon”, in “addition to the

emotionally loaded adjectives such as ‘fiendish’ and ‘appalling,’ it is mainly the modifications and modalizations that suggest Jukes’ subjective point of view in spite of apparently omniscient narration” (190).

This then is a book that, for all that it was first published in 1980, can be warmly recommended to the present-day reader.